History of The Regent's Canal

In 1801, the Grand Junction Canal was opened from the Midlands to London at Paddington Basin, linking with the national network of canals supplying the factories and mills of industrial England with coal and other raw materials. Within a year of its opening, a new canal, the 'London Canal', from Paddington to the Thames at Limehouse was proposed to provide a route from London Docks to Birmingham. Nothing came of it at the time.

It was not until 1810 that Thomas Homer, who had been associated with the Coventry Canal and was a shareholder in the Grand Junction Canal Company, raised the subject again and approached the architect John Nash, who had been laying out the Marylebone Estate – later Regent's Park. Nash saw the canal as an added feature for his park but feared that the plan to run the canal through the centre of it could jeopardise the sale of his villas to the gentry so he placed it on the northern perimeter in a deep cutting. Nash was employed both to lay out the park and to build the canal. He later secured the Prince Regent's permission to use his name for the canal and became the biggest shareholder in the new Regent's Canal Co.

Work started in 1812 and it took eight years to build the eight and a half mile cut with two tunnels and twelve locks. The construction work was beset with problems, many of the company's own making; this was Morgan's first canal project. It opened from Paddington to Camden in 1816 but four men were killed when an embankment collapsed at Chalk Farm. The Company also had to pay Thomas Lord £4000 to move his cricket ground away from the canal route to its present site; spoil from digging Maida Hill Tunnel was used for the surface of Lords Ground. From Camden the canal dropped 86 feet to Limehouse through twelve locks and the entire project was completed in 1820.

In an attempt to save water an experimental lock, designed by Sir William Congreve, was built at Camden but after four years trial and a serious accident the invention was abandoned and conventional locks used. More delays resulted from a dissenting landowner, William Agar, who discovered the proposed course of the canal, bought land on the route and demanded a large compensation to allow the company to cross it. Every setback added

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to the cost, and the companies finances were shaken further by the discovery, in 1815, that Homer had embezzled nearly £1500 of subscribers' money and fled the country. He was later sentenced to seven years transportation.

The situation worsened in the following year when the two and a half mile stretch from Paddington to Camden was opened; most of the £254,000 subscribed to build the entire canal had been spent so work halted. At the time there was serious unemployment in Britain and the 1817 Poor Employment Act was passed to provide Government funds for public works to provide jobs.

A loan of £200,000 was advanced to the Canal Company and the Regent's Canal was completed under a 'Job Creation Scheme'.

With great ceremony, the completed canal was opened on 1 August 1820. It was an immediate success, and companies rushed to fill the empty wharf sites. In 1823, the Imperial Gas, Light & Coke Company's gas works, the first of several alongside the canal, was built at St Pancras. Coal carried by sea from Newcastle and South Wales to the Regent's Canal Dock in Limehouse could then be unloaded onto barges and taken directly to the gas works.

One notable company operating on the Regent's Canal in the early years was Thomas Pickford Ltd. Their wharf at the southern end of City Road Basin was the biggest on the canal - boasting a fleet of 120 boats and stables for 120 horses in 1840. Pickford's had a reputation for speed and introduced non-stop boats or 'fly-boats', pulled at a trot by pairs of horses in relays - covering the usual four day trip to Birmingham in two and a half days.

The Birmingham to London Railway opened to Euston in 1837, posing a threat to the canals, though building materials for the railway termini in north London were carried on the Regent's Canal. Paradoxically, however, for a while the two systems worked in co-operation. Warehouses with access for barges underneath and railway wagons above were

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built for transhipment between rail and canal, for instance at Camden and at King's Cross, built in 1851. By 1867 the Great Northern Railway at King's Cross was bringing a million tons of coal to London, some of it transferred to the Regent's Canal for local delivery.

Pickford's built a depot nearby to take advantage of the new railway, but within 10 years had to close its canal carrying operation. In 1845, the canal's directors received the first of several offers to convert the canal into a railway, but the railway company failed to raise the £1,000,000 sales price and the offer was withdrawn four months later. Unlike many rural canals, the Regent's Canal was not bankrupted by railway competition; it served local industries and its coal trade was supplemented by the carriage of building materials for the massive expansion of Victorian London.

In the 1870's competition from the railways had forced down toll charges and the canals had to accept dangerous loads such as explosives which were refused by the railway companies. This had a disastrous effect in 1874 when a barge carrying blasting gun-powder blew up under Macclesfield Bridge, now locally known as 'blow-up' bridge.

Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd. took over the Grand Junction Canal Company's depot at City Road Basin and ran fly-boats up to Braunston in Northamptonshire for the next fifty years. Local trade made up most of the profits. The canal was still very busy and lock-keepers worked thirty six hour shifts, passing queues of barges up and down during the day and fly-boats at night.

By the late-nineteenth century, the London-to-Birmingham canal trade had passed to the railways and only a ninth of the Regent's Canal trade went out of London. On 1 April 1929 the Regent's Canal Company bought the Grand Junction Canal and several other canals to form the Grand Union Canal. Aggressive attempts to boost trade included cutting toll charges, increasing the narrowboat fleet and widening the locks between Braunston and Birmingham. The new company also purchased two ships to ply between the Regent's Canal dock, Antwerp and Rotterdam.

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The scheme might have succeeded but for a shortage of funds; the upsurge of business during World War II fell dramatically after the war and materials for the reconstruction of Britain were carried by road. Canals were nationalised in 1948, along with other forms of transport under the umbrella of the British Transport Commission, but the canal's decline continued. By the early 1960s, the M1 motorway had opened and trade on the Regent's Canal had dwindled to almost nothing. In 1963, the road haulage sector was denationalised and British Waterways took over the running of the canals. The Regent's Canal had become run down and there was talk of converting it into a road.

In the 1970s, proposals to build on empty wharf sites and fill in the City Road Basin met opposition from local residents and waterway enthusiasts. In the ensuing public debate, the canal became seen as an amenity that could be developed for public advantage. Towards the end of the decade, with the closing down of power stations in urban areas, the CEGB needed to bring supplies of electricity into central London. The high voltage supply was carried by six 400 kilowatt cables, which, in order to minimise impact on public highways, were laid beneath the towing path of the Regent's Canal which was then paved and made accessible for recreational purposes. British Waterways actively began to promote the canal as a leisure space for London, and with its agreement, local councils opened sections of the towing path to the public and several parks were built by the former GLC. Today, the Regent's Canal offers a peaceful retreat from the city life it helped to create.

As part of its promotion of the canal British Waterways London is committed to regenerating it for the benefit of the surrounding businesses and community. There are currently plans for a vibrant mixed-use location for businesses, homes, shops and leisure attractions at City Road Basin, the partnership, City Road Basin Ltd, aims to open up the Basin to the public for the first time.